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PREPARATION
FOR THE
OXFORD CONFERENCE

July 12-26, 1937

A Request to Delegates

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A REQUEST TO DELEGATES

The Conference at Oxford will meet, if it is permitted to meet at all, in circumstances of exceptional gravity. Systems of thought and conduct fundamentally incompatible with the Christian understanding of man's life and destiny have taken a powerful hold of the minds of men and command the allegiance and devotion of multitudes. Their adherents often manifest a devotion, discipline and self-sacrifice that are less clearly evident among Christians. Upon those who participate in a conference of the Churches at such a time there rests a grave responsibility. Upon their understanding of the situation and its demands, upon the loyalty and courage of their response to God's call, will depend the content and vigour of the lead which the Conference may give to the Church throughout the world in this hour of testing and conflict. Is it possible for those who will take part in the Conference, and for others whose interest has been awakened in its proceedings, to associate themselves in a common preparation?

Spiritual Preparation

The seriousness of the situation demands a return to the central simplicities of the Christian faith. Do we in the depths of our being believe in God? In the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? In a God who is inexpressibly greater and more mysterious than our apprehensions of Him or than the little systems in which we have sought to comprehend Him?

If a reborn, living faith in God is the deepest need of the Church, may not the path by which we reach it be one of utter self-

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despair? Must not the present state of apostasy and frustration be accepted as a judgment of the Church calling for whole-hearted repentance and a complete conversion of the mind? If that be so, the first necessity of renewal may be an unpalatable awakening of our minds to the inadequacy of what the Church at present is, of what it is attempting to say to the world, of what it sees and understands. And this awakening may have to come to us not as the intellectual acknowledgment of a general truth, that leaves the core of our being unaffected, but as a bitter, mortifying, personal experience, a shattering of our self-confidence and of things in which we have hitherto trusted, a painful, and at the same time vitalising, recognition of the superficiality, pettiness, and unreality of our apprehension of the truth and of our testimony and witness? Only out of a deep distrust and despair of self can the word be spoken which the world needs and which it will be willing to hear.

It is when we have nothing to hope for in ourselves that we may learn to hope for everything from God. There can be no trust in the God whom Christ revealed which sets any limits to His love and redeeming grace. It is only our unbelief and the hardness of our hearts that make us refuse to reckon with the possibility that in this dark hour of human history there might take place a spiritual rebirth, and forces be set in motion which would bring about a radical and fundamental change in the life of mankind. What stands in the way of this may be our own unwillingness to pay the price. It may be that we want it to come too easily; that we insist that it shall be nothing more than the confirmation and expansion of what our little minds already suppose to be the truth; that we will not endure the cost and pain of a complete shattering of our pre-conceived ideas and established habits; that we are afraid to stand naked and unprotected in the presence of the living God.

To trust in God — to look away entirely from self, to put one's whole confidence in God's mercy and goodness and to commit to Him one's whole being — is the highest and most difficult act of which man is capable. It demands a purifying, disciplining and concentration of the whole being. Is it not a necessary preparation for the Conference that we should daily submit ourselves entirely to the will of God, that through this discipline we may learn wholly to trust and joyously to obey Him? And, if this be our fundamental attitude, shall we not look forward with greater expectation to the periods of common worship and united prayer when the Conference assembles at Oxford than to the public discussions, important as these are as a means to the fulfilment of our prayers?

This day-by-day dependence upon God, this experience of redemption from the self-centred, self-reliant life into a life of

fellowship, trust and obedience, is the fundamental and characteristic Christian attitude, and contains the germ of what alone deserves to be called the Christian revolution.

And, again, if we are to learn anew in living experience to have faith in God, must it not express itself in a reborn belief in men as men? The knowledge of God, we are taught in the New Testament, comes through love, and the only way in which we can love God is to love Him in men. Is it not a necessary spiritual preparation for the Conference that we should learn a new respect for men and women, that we should grow in sensitiveness to human need, and that we should wage war more valiantly against all that injures, wastes or mutilates the bodies and the souls of men?

Intellectual Preparation

If the Church is to minister to the needs of men today it must have something to say which is felt to be relevant to the real problems with which life compels them to wrestle. What is the distinctive, immediate Word of God for our time? It is to this question that the Oxford Conference seeks an answer. What has been said about our spiritual need is true also of our need for intellectual clarity and insight. Our greatest danger is an underestimate of the revolution that is needed in our existing ideas. A new sense of direction and of mission can be born only out of profound dissatisfaction with what we already have. A deep, disturbing and painful realisation of the inadequacy of our present understanding both of God's truth and of the realities of human existence is the costly path by which we may be led to fuller apprehension of God's purpose for the Church. Conscious how small is the portion of truth which each of us sees, and how limited also is the tradition in which each of us has been trained, and believing in a God who is God of the whole earth and who fulfils Himself in many ways, we need to set ourselves as members of the Body of Christ to learn from one another. Our first obligation is to listen — not only to those opinions and testimonies which accord with our own, but still more to those which we find most foreign and uncongenial. Only those are fitted to participate in an œcumenical gathering who are persuaded that knowledge of God's truth is not the exclusive possession of any group, party or tradition, but is imparted by Him in diverse ways and measures to the whole body which is His Church, and who are ready in humility to learn from one another. In the fellowship of the whole body, and through the mutual enrich-

ment of its members we may learn that which in our separateness and isolation would remain for ever hidden from our eyes.

Towards this mutual understanding the preparatory work for the Conference is intended to contribute. The existence of a Research Department at Geneva has made possible during the three years preceding the Conference a greater thoroughness of preparation than has been possible in any previous conference. Questions too large and complex to be fully disentangled and understood in the pressure of the meetings of the Conference have been patiently studied and in some measure clarified by a continuous interchange of ideas between leading thinkers in different countries. The results of the preparatory work will be embodied in volumes, which will be issued in the months preceding the Conference. Delegates are urged to study and ponder the contents of these volumes. Through such preparation of the minds of those who take part in the Conference the possibilities of its contribution to the thought and life of the Church throughout the world will be immeasurably increased. The attention of delegates may be directed in the first instance to the following volumes which are already published or may be expected shortly : Adolf Keller, *Church and State on the Continent of Europe*(Epworth Press) ; William Adams Brown, *Church and State in Contemporary America* (Scribner) ; N. Ehrenström, *Christian Faith and the Modern State* (Student Movement Press) ; William Paton, *Christianity in the Eastern Conflicts : A Study in Christianity, Communism and Nationalism in Asia* (Edinburgh House Press).

Preparation for Action

In face of human needs which are desperate, and of conflicts of ultimate belief in which all that matters most to mankind is at stake, no one who has the capacity to feel or understand can tolerate the thought of a conference which exhausts itself in talk or is content to remain in the region of ideas. The only justification for holding the Conference is that it should lead to decision and issue in action. The purpose of thought is only to clear up and remove the uncertainties which inhibit and impede action. The object of discussion is to eliminate the misunderstandings which stand in the way of whole-hearted co-operation in action. The action which is called for is action on a heroic scale. Its range and scope ought to be reckoned, as has already been said, not by the possibilities of man but by the possibilities of God. Preparation for the Conference ought to be above all a preparation for decision and action.

The question of the kind of action appropriate to the Church

in the social and political spheres will be one of the major questions to be considered by the Conference. It is well to remind ourselves, however, from the beginning that action is in its nature concrete. It is always action by persons. It has always to be taken in given circumstances and in relation to a particular situation. It may be hoped the Conference may be able as the outcome of its common worship and deliberation to offer to the Church as a whole some guidance and helpful counsel as to the direction in which action is called for and the form which it should take. But it has to be remembered that the Conference at Oxford is not a legislative body and does not possess executive authority. The limits of action by the Conference as a conference must quickly be reached. If there is to be effective action it must be action by the Churches participating in the Conference. And this in turn implies decisions by those participating in the Conference to bring about action in the Churches to which they belong. The only way in which the Conference can issue in action is through personal decisions by the individuals who take part in its proceedings or who receive inspiration from its deliberations. For such decisions we must prepare ourselves from the start. Life becomes real when God lays on us a commission and we respond to His call. If those who assemble at Oxford meet as a body of determined men and women resolutely set on hearing God's command and on acting in accordance with it, each in his or her sphere, there is no limit to the changes in human history which may result from such an œcumenical gathering in the present grave state of the world.

The suggested preparation may be summed up in the following Key-Words :

FAITH IN GOD BORN OUT OF SELF-DESPAIR.

THE SPIRIT OF LEARNING IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE BODY.

OBEDIENCE, DECISION AND ACTION.

IMP. RÉUNIES, VALENCE — 24-11-36